

VZCZCXRO1656
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNN
DE RUEHBK #2655/01 2890805
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 160805Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8639
RHMFIUU/DEPT OF HOMELAND SECURITY WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
INFO RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 7158
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002655

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [EAIR](#) [KHLs](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: Bangkok Airport Receives Good Marks Despite Remaining
Unresolved Security Issues

REF: BANGKOK 3492

BANGKOK 00002655 001.2 OF 002

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Officials from the U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) conducted an assessment of Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport (BKK) at the end of September. TSA noted that Airports of Thailand (AoT) has made noticeable progress with security measures in the past year, especially in passenger screening, access control, and physical security structures. Since late 2008, political protests and media reports about shakedowns of tourists have been a source of public embarrassment for the RTG, as Thailand struggles to restore its huge tourism industry amid the global economic downturn. Although some serious security issues remain at BKK, the results of the assessment show that the work of TSA and AoT has been productive so far. END SUMMARY.

Progress on Airport Security

2. (SBU) Aviation security concerns took center stage in late 2008 with the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) movement's takeover of Bangkok's airports (reftel). Thousands of protestors against the government of then-Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat seized the passenger terminal building of Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport (BKK) on November 25, 2008, shutting it down for 11 days. The airport re-opened for service on December 5, 2008, albeit with extensive cancellations and delays. In the aftermath of the shutdown, U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officials conducted extensive technical visits in December 2008 and February 2009 to ascertain the airport's level of compliance with international standards for aviation security. The visits identified a number of aviation security weaknesses requiring significant commitment to achieve compliance with international standards.

3. (SBU) Working closely with the Embassy's TSA Representative, the Airports of Thailand Public Company Limited (AoT) and Thai Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) have since taken significant steps to achieve security improvements. Examples of the assistance TSA has provided to the AoT and DCA include: re-design of checkpoints and the screening process, training in aviation security quality control and inspections, and analysis and re-drafting of the Thai National Civil Aviation Security Program (NCASP) against international standards (NOTE: The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) requires every signatory country to develop an NCASP in order to outline a strategy to reach ICAO standards on security. END NOTE.) TSA also facilitated the travel of a delegation of AoT officials and screening contractors to San Francisco International Airport (SFO) in June to observe efficient and effective aviation security practices and to consult with TSA-SFO management.

4. (SBU) Marked improvements towards mitigating deficiencies

identified through consultations with TSA have been evident since May 2009. They include enhancements in airport physical infrastructure, implementation of new and more effective detection technologies (e.g. to scan for explosives) for the screening of passengers and their cabin baggage, and improvements to overall airport access control.

Despite the Progress Concerns Return

15. (SBU) Security concerns at the airport returned to public attention in recent months with local and international media reporting on criminal activity at Suvarnabhumi. In one instance, a British couple claimed they were the victims of an extortion scam after being accused of shoplifting from a duty free shop at the airport in July 2009. The media have also reported on tourist complaints about illegal taxi drivers and tour operators. Tourists allege that unregistered drivers and operators are harassing them upon arrival, and attempting to charge inflated service fees. (NOTE: Press reports allege that the reported scam and other crimes involve an organized criminal network with ties to officials in the AoT. This allegation has not been substantiated. END NOTE.)

16. (SBU) According to an AoT spokesman, in the wake of this attention, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva criticized Minister of Transport Sothong Zarum for failing to keep Suvarnabhumi's operations in line with international standards. Prime Minister Abhisit ordered that henceforth, tourists accused of stealing be handled more transparently and demanded improvements to security and response to criminal activity at the airport.

17. (SBU) The AoT and the Royal Thai Police (RTP) responded with the arrest of over 1,000 illegal taxi drivers and over 400 illegal tour guides. The civil penalties issued for these infractions are

BANGKOK 00002655 002.2 OF 002

equivalent to approximately 30 USD per offense. In response to passenger complaints of theft from checked baggage, AoT issued baggage handlers work garments with no pockets in which stolen items may be secreted. These workers are now also being screened prior to entering and prior to leaving their assigned work areas. Finally, in late September, Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban approved a proposal by the RTP to establish a police substation at BKK staffed by approximately 280 police officers. The substation will be under the control of the Tourist Police Division and will address law enforcement issues inside the airport; provincial and national police will continue to respond to law enforcement matters outside the airport.

18. (SBU) Reports of low-level criminal activity at the airport highlight areas of continued concern regarding aviation security. The primary concern with unregistered taxi drivers and tour guides lies in their ability to easily and against airport rules and regulations obtain temporary airport passes, allowing them to greet arriving passengers in the baggage claim area, normally a restricted access area at BKK. The TSA Representative has repeatedly encouraged the tightening of restrictions on the issuance of airport access credentials. He has also provided recommendations for enhancing the scope of background checks prior to issuance of access credentials, and suggested methods for recurrent verification of access privileges, including scrutiny of workers with possible financial troubles. (NOTE: The TSA Representative notes that workers willing to steal for monetary gain represent a security weakness because they may be influenced to conduct other illegal activity. END NOTE.)

Results of the TSA Assessment

19. (SBU) In compliance with its mandate under Title 49 U.S.C. Subsection 44907, TSA conducted an assessment of BKK from September 28 through October 5, 2009. The assessment focused on five vectors critical to security: passengers and cabin baggage, hold baggage, cargo, catering, and access control. TSA evaluates threats in the

context of the location of the airport. Bangkok, as a key transit point in mainland Southeast Asia, is regarded as a higher risk location than most of its neighbors.

¶10. (SBU) TSA officials noted significant improvements in the re-design and execution of certain security measures at BKK, including: more effective screening of passengers, enhanced prevention of mingling of screened and unscreened passengers, increased lighting of sensitive areas of the airport perimeter and operations area, and more consistent access control identification. These accomplishments reflect the work of extensive consultations with TSA since the airport closure in November 2008.

¶11. (SBU) Among the areas for improvement, TSA officials observed that AoT officials could achieve greater security at a more efficient cost by fine-tuning their approach. For example, in response to both security concerns and illegal activity, airport officials have installed closed-circuit TV (CCTV) cameras as the solution. However, they have not hired additional personnel to monitor the CCTV cameras, nor have they implemented an action plan to respond in a timely manner to an incident detected by them.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: The positive assessment is a welcome sign for the RTG after a difficult year at Suvarnabhumi. Nonetheless, significant work remains for the AoT and the DCA. Most importantly, the DCA must fulfill its role as the regulator, including gaining approval for the NCASP. This document will serve as the basis for ensuring that the DCA has the appropriate legal framework and is adequately funded to fulfill its obligations. The RTG must also conduct a risk assessment of BKK. Appropriate authorities to accomplish this would include AoT, DCA, and national intelligence officials. END COMMENT

JOHN